DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 229 PS 012 604

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TITLE Latchkey Children: The Child's View of Self Care.
PUB DATE [81]
NOTE 29p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Youth; Comparative Analysis; *Elementary School Students; *Emotional Experience; Family Characteristics; *Family Life; One Parent Family; *Parent Child Relationship; Siblings; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Latchkey Children

ABSTRACT

In order to specify in detail the nature of the experience of "latchkey" children, 50 children left at home after school without adult supervision and 32 continuously supervised children were interviewed in a study conducted in an all-black, parochial school. Study group subjects were every latchkey child enrolled in grades one through six and constituted 34 per cent of the total student enrollment in these six grades. A comparison group was formed by collecting a representative sample of children who were supervised by an adult when not in school. After an overview of social change since 1940 to the present and its impact on the American family, findings are presented first in terms of differences between latchkey children left alone and latchkey children left with siblings, and second, in terms of differences between unsupervised children and supervised children. Findings discussed include the importance of keys, the nature of parental instructions, chores, home routines, outside play, having friends over, illness, summertime and holidays, and fears. It was found, for example, that more than 30 per cent of the children left alone reported high levels of fear and that the most common method for coping with fear used by latchkey children was hiding. Not a single child in the adult supervised group was classed in the high-fear category. Additional findings are discussed and eight conclusions about the experience of latchkey children are presented. (Author/RH)

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Latchkey Children: The Child's View of Self Care

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The assistance of Karen Blair, Barbara Orlans, George Perry, and Carol Rosenblum as part of the data-collecting team is gratefully acknowledged.

PS012604

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ABSTRACT

Fifty-three latchkey children and thirty-two children continually supervised by an adult were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Children who were left alone routinely during after school hours experienced more fear but were better informed of procedures for dealing with their own physical well-being than were children who spent their after-school hours in the company of siblings. Children who were continuously supervised by an adult experienced much less fear than did those in the other two groups, but depended heavily on the parent/adult to respond to any emergency that might arise. Forty percent of the children left alone could neither go outside nor invite friends over while their parents were absent. Isolation for latchkey children became especially pronounced during vacation and holiday periods. A close parental relationship appeared to moderate somewhat the negative effects of the latchkey experience.

Introduction

The phenomenon of the school age child who provides self-care before or after school, during vacations, snow days, or periods of personal illness began growing in America during the Second World War. In 1940 the 28 percent rate of all women 14 years of age and older participating in the labor force was over three times the 9 percent rate of all mothers. By 1946 the 28 percent rate of all working women had climbed to 31 percent, but the number of working mothers had doubled to more than 18 percent. The absence of fathers and the lack of available day care services found a growing number of children left in care of themselves after school until mother returned home from work.

Between 1940 and 1976 the labor force participation rate of mothers increased more than fivefold, reflecting the most significant change in the labor force this country has ever experienced. By 1980 more than 50 percent of all mothers were participating in the labor force outside the home. Predictions are that by the end of the decade of the 80's two out of every three mothers will be employed outside the home.

As the demographics of the labor force have changed, so other social changes have had their impact on child care. The number of divorces relative to the number of marriages is now one in two. Nineteen percent of all children below the age of 18 are living with only one parent, and for black

families the total is more than 50 percent. The society has become so mobile that more often than not there is no "grandma's house" to go to. In one generation the number of homes having a third or fourth adult has dropped from roughly 10 percent to less than 4. In the United States one live birth in six is to an unwed mother. There is a growing number of divorces accounted for by the desertion of the wife as well as the husband, or accompanied by the unwillingness of either parent to take custody of the children. Parents in 1981 have to earn 2½ times the money they earned in 1967 in order to generate the same buying power. The economy, the scarcity and costliness of day care, the reduction of extracurricular school programs, changes in the work force, shifts in the constitution of the family, and geographic mobility form an interrelated web in which care for children is engulfed.

In the face of rapid social changes, social response to care of the school-aged child has lagged far behind. The number-one problem of working mothers is their access to adequate child care. While public support of child care has steadily increased, the bulk of public monies in this area is spent for care for pre-school-aged children. Somehow our society has managed to overlook the continuing need for supervised child care throughout at least the child's elementary school years and for the entire period that the caregiving parent is working outside the home. The result is a rapid growth in the number of children we refer to as "latchkey."

"Latchkey" is a term that generally defines children who are left to take care of themselves, left to use group recreational programs, play in the street, stay home alone, join a gang, or in general supervise themselves, or for whom the care arrangements are so loosely made as to be virtually ineffective. As a situation latchkeyism dates back to the early nineteenth century when children left on their own wore their housekeys on chains around their necks. The vast majority of latchkey children are school age, although we have encountered reports of children as young as four who are left at home routinely without the benefit of adult supervision. The Report of the Joint Commission on the Mental Health of Children (1970) estimated that at that time there were 38,000 children under age six who were left alone and double that number left with a brother or sister only slightly older.

Despite the rise in single-parent and two-paycheck families, there has been no wholesale conversion to one of the the newer child care options, although there has been a significant increase in enrollments in pre-school educational programs. Parents still report relying on the same sources of child care that traditionally have been used in this country. Eighty percent of all parents report that they are the main caretakers of their children. Even among preschoolers whose mothers work full-time, more than 40 percent are said to be cared for primarily by their parents. For the six to thirteen year old

group, school is the major caretaker supplemented by parents and others. Reports are misleading, however, since care by parents usually does not indicate that the care is full-time or continuous. The reality is that the number of subteens who routinely spend some part of each weekday caring for themselves is skyrocketing in every economic bracket. General social disapproval is giving way to accomodation if not understanding, especially in the face of a general lack of information on the consequences of child self-supervision.

Data from the Bureau of the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that in 1975 there were more than 16 million children of working mothers between the ages of three and thirteen but that less than 2 percent were enrolled in any type of group care center. In 10 percent of the cases the children cared for themselves. The number of children in a self-care situation jumped to nearly 14 percent when children from ages seven to thirteen only were included.

Reports regarding the current number of latchkey children are slowly being tabulated, but estimates from the 1980 census are not likely until 1983. Joan H. Wiskowski, Assistant Commissioner for the New Jersey Department of Labor and Industry reported in 1979 before the United States Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources that there was an estimated total of 66,000 latchkey children in New Jersey alone, nearly three times as many as there were children enrolled in child care centers. She further reported that in the school-age category, ages six to thirteen, there were approximately 65,000 latchkey children,

with only 5,000 children in this age category enrolled in group day care centers.

There have been several recent articles published in the popular press dealing with the subject of latchkey children (Redbook, September 1980; Newsweek, February 16, 1981; Family Circle, February 24, 1981; and Working Mother, May, 1981). All cite figures from labor or census statistics or tabulated responses from parents of latchkey children. The conflict about the benefit or detriment of self-care arrangements is usually noted by referring to child experts or parents' observations. Most of these articles end on a generally positive note regarding the latchkey experience indicating that latchkey children learn earlier than they otherwise might to master self-help skills, take on responsibility and solve problems. Parents see their latchkey children as contributing more to the family as a unit and being proud of this contribution. The problem we see in these reports is the bias of the observing parents. Most parents, who use child self-care as their major means for supplementing the school as the caretaker of their children, report that they feel they have no available or affordable alternative. Three-quarters of reporting parents indicate they would prefer an arrangement other than child self-care. In a report published by the School Age Day Care Task Force (Office of Child Development, USDHEW June 2, 1972) when parents were asked to list the five most important things they would look for in choosing an after-school child care program for school-aged children 6 through 14, the number one priority

at all age levels was that the children have adult supervision at all times.

In the light of evident, continuous and rapid changes in the labor force and a much slower rate of change among the 18 or 20 potential resources commonly available for providing school-age day care, it seemed important to us to investigate further the impact of child self-care from the point of view of the child. The phenomenon of the latchkey child will not likely go away or be adequately responded to in the near future. According to all available estimates this phenomenon will grow at an astounding pace throughout the 1980's. Parents seem unable or unwilling to bear the entire cost of supervised child care and the public seems just as unwilling or unable to subsidize supervised care adequately for all subteens. The United States is now the only industrialized nation that does not insure health care or a minimum income for every family with young children, and the only one that has not yet established a comprehensive program of child-care for children of working mothers.

The Washington, D. C. Study

The site selected for this study was an all-black, parochial school located in Washington, D. C. The main reason for limiting our investigation to this population was the availability of a cooperative group of parents and children. A second reason was that, while these children might be somewhat atypical of the general school population in the city of Washington, it was projected that they would represent an underestimate of the latchkey problem since the children came from families who could afford to pay nearly $1,000 a year in additional tuition

and other educational expenses, and there was no indication that there was a higher incidence of two-paycheck families in this group than in the general Washington, D. C. black population.

The main concern of this study, which was carried out by five investigators conducting semi-structured interviews with every latchkey child enrolled in grades one through six, and a representative sample of children who were supervised by an adult when not in school, was to see if differing groups of children made similar reports, or made reports similar to those of parents in studies covering the same topic. Interviews were conducted with 53 latchkey children and 32 children continually supervised by an adult. Interviews averaged about 30 minutes in length. The number of latchkey children in grades one through six represented 34 percent of the total student enrollment in these six grades. Twenty-eight percent of the latchkey children spent their after-school hours in the company of siblings, all with one or more older siblings. The average age of the supervising sibling was 12 years, 10 months. Seventy-two percent of the latchkey children were home alone.

The latchkey children were almost equally divided as to sex (26 females and 27 males). No first grader was left alone: all had at least one sibling at home. In our population, children left with siblings tended to enter this caretaking arrangement sooner (average age 6 vs. 8 for those left alone) and tended to be a younger group (average age at the time of interview 8.5 vs. 9.5). Older sisters were five times as likely to be the caretakers of a younger sibling than were older brothers. In two of the fifteen cases the supervising sibling was age 9.

Forty percent of the sibling group and 44 percent of the child alone group lived with a single parent. Only one of the single-parent households was headed by a father. Children were twice as likely to live in an apartment, if they resided with a single parent.

The school where the interviews were conducted terminated instruction at 2:40 pm. Most students could arrive home by 3:00. The parents who left their child alone arrived home between the hours of four and nine pm. Alone children were without adult supervision an average of 2¼ hours each weekday. Children at home with siblings were without adult supervision from ½ to 5½ hours a day; the average number of hours without adult supervision for the sibling group was three. These times were described by the children in either group as usual or minimum amounts of time since parents were often delayed at work or in traffic. There was no difference in the average amount of time a child in third grade was left unsupervised as compared with a sixth grader, for example.

Keys

Keys were very important to the children interviewed. All of those going to be home alone carried keys. If the child would be home with an older sibling, the older sibling carried the key. When children were asked what they would do if the key were lost, 30 percent said they would wait outside until an adult arrived; another 30 percent said they would wait at a neighbor's, and 30 percent said they could obtain a second key from a neighbor, nearby relative, building manager or from a special hiding place. Approximately 10 percent expressed a variety of solutions to the lost key problem, including "crying," going to the police station,

or calling mom.

Parental Instructions

There was a considerable difference in the instructions communicated by parents to the children at home alone and those there with older siblings. While the instructions varied slightly from child to child, the home alone children generally recalled the following: Be sure to lock the door after you arrive home; Call, usually mother, upon your arrival; Don't let anyone in the house; Don't tell people you are home alone; especially don't tell people who call on the telephone; Don't use the stove; Call a parent in case of an emergency. If the child were home with an older sibling, the major instructions recalled were: Change clothes; do homework. Some in this group simply recalled instructions like: "behave," "be good," "take care of yourself," or "don't open the door." In general, it appeared that, if parental instructions were given to those in the sibling group, they were given to the older sibling and not clearly passed on to the younger child, if they were passed on at all.

Chores

Children in both groups were given chores to do. The most frequent chores were washing dishes, cleaning their rooms, emptying the trash, vacuuming or making beds. Ninety percent of the children at home with siblings were assigned chores to do, while 70 percent of the girls and 60 percent of the boys in the home alone group reported that they were expected to do some housework. The great majority of the children indicated that they carried out their assigned chores despite disliking them.

Home Routine

The typical routine for the home-alone children was much more predictable then the routine of the sibling group. Most of these children sequentially described the following activities: Call parent; change clothes; have a snack; watch T.V.; do chores; do homework. Those children at home with siblings indicated a more flexible schedule. This might be attributed somewhat to the greater freedom allowed children who were home with their sisters and/or brothers.

Outside Play

All the children were asked if they were allowed to play outside before an adult arrived home. Fifty-seven percent of the children in the alone group could go outside while 67 percent of the sibling group were allowed such freedom. The area of outside play activity for nearly all children was restricted to the yard or the neighborhood, however. In this study, there were noticeable sex differences with respect to outside play. Fifty percent of the girls home alone said they could go outside while nearly 70 percent of the alone boys could. For the group at home with siblings 60 percent of the boys and 70 percent of the girls could play outside. But these latter figures must be moderated by an age factor. None of the boys at home with siblings were in either the fifth or sixth grades, while more than 40 percent of the sibling girls were enrolled in grade six. All of the second graders at home alone were housebound, while approximately 25 percent of the sixth graders were confined to the house. All of the fifth and sixth grade boys could play outside.

Having Friends Over

Eighty percent of the children at home alone could not invite friends into their homes under any circumstances when an adult was not present. Sixty percent of the sibling boys were told they could not have friends over, but fewer than 30 percent of the sibling girls were given such instructions.

Approximately 40 percent of the children alone were totally isolated. They could not go outside or invite friends over. One-third of the sibling group was confined to their homes with only their siblings for playmates.

Illness

What happens to these children when they become ill? In sixty-seven percent of the alone group cases an adult, usually the mother, would stay with the child. The other one-third reported staying home alone, sometimes. One student put it like this, "If it's just a cold or something, I stay home by myself. But if I'm really sick, my mother or grandmother will stay home and take care of me." For the sibling group, 60 percent of the time the sick child reported being cared for by an adult, 20 percent of the time caring for oneself and 20 percent of the time being cared for by an older sibling.

Summertime and Holidays

Summer vacations pose a particularly trying time for latch-key children. For the alone group, 28 percent reported spending most or all of the summer alone with perhaps a week off for camp or four weeks in summer school. Thirty-three percent of the alone group was sent to live with a relative, usually a grand-parent. Some loved it; others found it boring. Twenty-eight

percent of the alone children spent a large part or all of the summer in day camp. Only three of this group (8%) spent the summer at home with a parent; the rest were placed with babysitters. All the fifth and sixth grade students spent their past summer at home alone; younger children were sent to relatives. One sixth grade girl complained because she spent the entire summer locked in her house until her mother came home from work at 4:30. It was only then that she could go outside for play. She reported "hating summers" and found them "very boring." By contrast, 30 percent of the sibling group attended camp; 30 percent stayed home with an older sister; 23 percent stayed with a relative; while only one child reported being home alone and one reported being with a parent. Holidays, when a parent is not also on holiday, are generally spent with the same kind of care arrangements that would be in effect after school on a school day.

Fears

Yi-Fu Tuan (Landscapes of Fear N. Y.: Pantheon Books, 1979) has reported from a national survey of 7-11 year olds that ¼ fear playing outdoors and fear someone breaking in or harming them. He further notes that children tend to feel secure in the presence of parental figures and vulnerable when alone. In the present study, four avenues were used to assess the prevalence of fears in children: a) expressed fears: b) recurrent bad dreams or nightmares; c) expressed methods for coping with fears; and d) general impressions of the child's fear as rated by the interviewer. More than 30% of the children in the home alone group reported high levels of fear about staying home alone. The most common fear was of someone breaking into the house. Associated with this fear was fear of noises, of the dark, or of animals barking or crying which

might indicate the presence of danger. Forty percent of the alone group reported recurring nightmares which were usually reported as being associated with something viewed on television, and/or being chased. Nearly 38 percent of the home alone group was rated by interviewers as evidencing high levels of fear. These 14 children were evenly divided as to sex, seven boys and seven girls.

For the group at home with siblings 20 percent reported high levels of fear at home; these children were all in the primary grades. Twenty-six percent of the sibling group reported regularly recurring nightmares. These nightmares were largely reported as being associated with being attacked and/or killed. Only 13 percent of the sibling group was rated by interviewers as evidencing high levels of fear.

The most common method for coping with fear used by latchkey children was hiding. Children who hid reported hiding in a shower, under or in a bed, in a locked closet or bathroom. The second most common method of fear reduction was the television, often played at a loud volume. Television served three purposes: it distracted the child; it drowned out frightening noises; and it warned potential intruders that someone was in the house. Children also reported calling parents frequently, putting on lots of lights, hanging around school to avoid going home, calling a friend or neighbor, checking throughout the house or going outside. One girl reported sitting in a chair holding a shoe to fight off attackers. A boy routinely checks the whole house, including doors, windows and closets as soon as he comes home. Frightened children at home with a sibling often hide by the sibling for comfort.

Pets

Children at home alone often turned to pets for comfort. Pets were also seen as helping to reduce fear, although the barking of a pet dog, for example, could at times increase the child's alarm. One-third of the children in either group had a pet of some kind at home; dogs predominated as pets. When asked, every other child in the alone group wanted a pet, usually a dog. In the sibling group, 70 percent did not want a pet, and among those without a pet at present who also wanted one, there was a great deal of variety as to the pet preferred: dog, cat, fish, or rabbit.

Television

Because it was assumed that television played a large part in the lives of these children, each child was asked about his or her television viewing habits, including "How much television do you watch each day?" Every effort was made to get an accurate estimate of viewing habits by querying children about specific shows and checking the shows mentioned against local television station schedules. The range of average television viewing time for children home alone was from "not at all" to seven hours daily; the average amount of television watched daily was 4 hours and 40 minutes. Only three children in the alone group indicated their television viewing time was limited by parental direction, while 18 of the 38 children in this group indicated they watched television almost continuously until an adult arrived home, or until bedtime.

For children at home with siblings the range of average television viewing time was from one to five hours daily. The average amount of time watched daily was 3 hours and 10 minutes.

None of the children in this group indicated that their television viewing time was limited by parental direction, although one child said he had to have his homework finished first and four other children said they were not allowed to watch scary programs. Two children specifically mentioned they "watch a lot of television" and two others said they "often fall asleep watching T.V."

Relationship with Parents

Every effort was made to obtain an understanding of the kind of relationship the child perceived with his or her parent or parents. Questions were asked about who cooked the meals; the whereabouts of an absent parent; the frequency of visits with this parent, and the child's feeling about both the present and/or absent parent; activities in which both the child and either parent participated; what the child liked doing with his or her parents, and the frequency of this interaction. Children were also asked how they thought their parents felt about them: how the child knew the parents felt this way; and whom the child usually went to for help when he or she had a problem. Interviewers were asked to rate the quality of the relationship they felt the child had with a primary adult.

Overall there seemd to be a marked difference in the closeness to parents perceived by children at home alone and those the there with siblings. Based on a 4-point scale (4 = very close, 1 = distant), the average quality of the relationship of the children home alone was rated as close (2.891) to one or both parents, versus a rating of somewhat distant (2.266) when the relationship between a child at home with a sibling and his or her parents was judged.

Based on the approach taken in this survey, children at home with an older sibling seemed to generate a closer attachment to the sibling than to the parents, in terms of finding responses to life needs. However this conclusion must be moderated by several factors: children home alone usually were only children and therefore could be expected to have received more of the parents' attention; all the latchkey children in this study who were home with a sibling, were home with one or more older siblings; and parents of children at home with a sibling would simply have less time to devote to any one child in a family of multiple children.

One bit of information that surprised us somewhat was that the closer the relationship the child perceived with one or both parents, the fewer the reported fears or bad dreams. This connection did not appear to be moderated by the attachment the child perceived with a sibling. The children appeared to perceive a closer attachment with their parents if they did things with the parents. Activities might range from watching T.V. together, a low priority, to working on the car together, reading and playing together, and sharing weekend activities such as shopping, hiking, and engaging in other sports activities or taking vacations together. Children also perceived a closer attachment with their parents if the parents were perceived as expressing concern about the child. Expressions of parental concern for the child's welfare were more frequently recalled by children at home alone. This is probably representative of a greater degree of felt concern by parents who leave their children alone as opposed to those who leave them with a sibling. Telephone calls between children at home alone and parents usually had a safety theme:

"I'm O K, Mom!" or "Are you alright?" Telephone conversations between parents and children with siblings at home were frequently to enlist the parent's aid in resolving sibling conflicts. A parent with a child at home alone was much more likely to initiate a telephone conversation. One third grade girl at Home alone said her mother called her every hour.

Emergencies

Of the 53 children interviewed who were at home without adult supervision only two recalled being involved in a serious emergency. In one of the sibling families the house caught fire while the parent was away. A 12-year old sibling extinguished the blaze. The 10-year old we interviewed was quite frightened by the experience and spoke at some length about ways to extinguish fires in the future. He also interjected such admonitions as "Don't fall asleep; smoke could kill you!" This child was classed as a high-fear child with frequent and recurring nightmares and daytime fears ranging widely from fear of rain, thunder and lightening to persons following him. He watches T.V. and cuddles close to his 13-year old sister when afraid. In what appeared to be a somewhat typical pattern for the high fear children, his relationship with both parents was considered distant. His mother and father were separated. He resided with his mother and multiple other siblings in an apartment. He had been in the care of a sibling since age three or four.

One of the children at home alone experienced a break-in attempt. The 9-year old crept to the telephone, called his mother and then hid. The boy said his mother came home "right away." This child, while generally feeling "O. K." about staying home alone, said that he usually feels a "little scared." This

child was classed as a low fear child. He has occasional frightening dreams, usually about dragons. He is careful to lock all the doors to the house. In a somewhat typical pattern for low fear children, he resides with both parents and his relationship with them was considered close. He began as a latchkey child at age 8.

Comparison with Non-Latchkey Children

Interviews were conducted with 32 children, randomly selected from the same school, who routinely were under some form of adult supervision when not in school. Our hope was to make some general between-group comparisons. Eighteen female and fourteen male students were interviewed. Fourteen of these students were cared for primarily by a mother or father after school hours, fourteen by a relative; two were placed in an after-school day-care setting, and two were cared for by a sitter. These arrangements are listed in general terms since sometimes a father took over after work as the mother left for work, or an aunt or grandmother watched the child part-time followed by a sitter or a parent.

It is especially interesting to note that in every instance where the child had more or less continuous adult supervision, the child resided with two or more adults, although not necessarily both parents. Seventy-five percent of the children in the adult-supervised category lived with both parents. The rest of the children resided with aunts and uncles, grandparents, step-parents or a combination of a parent and a close relative. Twenty percent of these children resided in an apartment compared with approximately 50 percent of the latchkey children. Fewer than 20 percent of the adult-supervised children carried keys

to their houses.

Instructions

When contrasting instructions communicated to the adult-supervised group of children with those in either of the other two groups, the difference is quite marked. Adult-supervised children reported that almost no routine instructions were given them. Some reported that they were usually expected to do homework, change their clothes, or practice the piano, but in general daily activities seemed to be determined by habit or the wishes of the supervising adult. Few of these children were taught how to handle an emergency and none of them had ever practiced emergency procedures. This data would lend some support to the argument that latchkey children more readily learn to master self-help skills and take on personal responsibility for survival and problem-solving. The contrast is most marked for the latchkey child home alone and the adult supervised child. The child at home with a sibling is almost as poorly instructed in emergency procedures as the adult supervised child according to our data.

Home Routine and Regulation of Play

The home routine for the adult supervised child was the most flexible of all the groups. Seventy-five percent of this group said they could both play outside and have friends over. Actually this figure is closer to 90 percent, since two children were in day care and two said they didn't go out much and complained that their lack of friends was due to being cared for in a home removed from the proximity of their school chums. By contrast with the latchkey children, adult supervised children appear to be encouraged to play outdoors and with friends.

Television

Adult supervised children also watch a lot of television, although it was harder for us to estimate the average number of hours viewed, since T.V. viewing was often interspersed with activities with the present adult and outside play. Half of these children reported parental limits on their T.V. viewing. These limits usually governed program content. The children would tell us they could not watch "sexy movies," "shows with bad language," "scary movies," or "shows where men mess around with women," or that they were limited to watching cartoons.

A conservative estimate would be that children in this group average between three and four hours of television viewing time each day, although the average time for any one child varied widely. It appeared to us that these children watch at least as much television as the sibling group, though not as much as the children in the home alone group.

Fears and Relationship with Parents

Perhaps the most startling contrasts between groups were in the fear area. On composite measures, approximately 1 in 3 children in the home alone group evidence high levels of fear; this held true for about 1 in 5 in the sibling group, but not a single child in the adult supervised group was classed in the high-fear category. Sixty-eight percent of the adult supervised children expressed low or no general fears. Eighty percent gave no indication of recurrent or significantly frightening nightmares. Fewer than 1 in 3 of the adult supervised children expressed even a moderate amount of fear and/or indicated that they had memorable "scary" dreams. Even then more than half

of these children qualified their statements by saying that they experienced fears or had bad dreams when they were alone.

The contrasts between groups in the area of fear, while lacking in precision and certainly open to interviewer bias, nonetheless were quite marked and do suggest between-group differences. The data seem to support the contention that children tend to feel secure in the presence of adults and vulnerable when alone. Furthermore, it appears that, despite the protestations of many of the children that they felt able and responsible, if the child was alone, he or she was experiencing fear to a greater or lesser extent.

While we did not interview parents to determine how aware they were that their latchkey children were frightened, judging from other published surveys of parents of latchkey children, these parents are not fully alert to the possible negative consequences the latchkey experience is having on their children. We further note that in every group we surveyed, the closer the relationship between one or both parents and the child, the lower the expressed fear, but that in 20 to 25 percent of the cases the children gave a wealth of indicators that their relationships with their parents were distant or somewhat distant.

As an example, one third-grade daughter of a two-paycheck family replied that, if she were experiencing a problem, she would "go to no one - they couldn't stop it." She further indicated that she spent most of her time in her playroom, was supervised by her grandmother, and did very little with her parents. This child expressed high anger, said she would like to run away, and disliked her present life. She was also one of our highest fear children in the adult supervised group. She had

a specific fear of being alone in the basement or kitchen; was afraid of noises, and had disturbing dreams.

By contrast, a first grade daughter of a two-paycheck family could talk articulately and in detail about playing with both her mother and father; she knew things her parents worried about and had no hesitation saying that she would go to mother if she needed help. This child was supervised by her father during the day - he worked the four to midnight shift; by a sitter from three until four pm., and by her mother after four. This interviewee made a special point of saying that her parents wouldn't let kids stay home alone. (She resided with a 5-year old brother and an 18-month old cousin.) "Someone might come and take them," she said.

Vacations, Holidays, and Sick Days

Since most of the children in the adult supervised group were also living in two-paycheck families, indeed one-third of the them had spent some time at home alone, we were curious how these children managed during vacations, holidays, and sick days. One-half spent summers with a relative, usually a grandparent; 25 percent went to a camp; two children stayed home with mother; the rest were placed with sitters. On holidays, one half stayed with a relative; 25 percent went to work with either mother or father; four children stayed home alone or with a sibling; the remainder stayed with a sitter. If the child were sick, 75 percent would be cared for by a parent; 90 percent of the time, this would be mother. In twenty percent of the cases, a relative would nurse the child. In only 5 percent of the cases was a sitter called upon to care for a sick child.

Conclusions

While it is impossible to project exactly our findings to another setting, we believe that it is possible to draw some conclusions that are significant beyond the target school investigated.

First: The latchkey phenomenon for black, urban, elementary school children affects a significant proportion of these children. It is probable that one child out of every three in this category could be considered a latchkey child according to our definition. Black, urban, elementary school girls and boys are left to supervise themselves in approximately equal numbers during out-of-school hours. And, while the phenomenon affects even pre-school children, by third grade an appreciable number of children are being allowed to supervise themselves on a regular basis during after school hours either alone or in the company of a sibling seldom more than five years older.

Second: Black, urban, latchkey children are very likely to be residing with a single parent. According to our data, no less than 40 percent of these children will be living in one-parent households.

Third: While the length of time an individual latchkey child might be left without adult supervision varies widely, on average these children will spend between 2 and 3 hours of every school day without direct adult care. This amount of time is often greatly extended during holiday and vacation periods.

Fourth: The carrying of a housekey is a usual sign of a latchkey child. Elementary school-aged children who are met by an adult at home routinely are seldom accorded custody of a key.

Fifth: Parents who leave their child home alone (not in the company of siblings) communicate greater physical safety concerns to these children, instruct them better in certain survival skills, and establish more consistent routines for these children than do parents who leave more than one child at home or who provide continuing adult supervision for their child. Moreover, children who are at home under adult care or who are being supervised by an older sibling are generally less well equipped to be personally effective in the case of an emergency than a child of comparable age and maturity who has been left in self-care.

Sixth: The socializing play of latchkey children is seriously curtailed by the latchkey experience. If a child is left alone, without sibling company, he or she stands one chance in two of being completely cut off from physical contact with playmates until an adult arrives home. A latchkey child with siblings at home stands at least one chance in three of only sharing with siblings until an adult arrives. By contrast, approximately 90 percent of children with continued adult supervision experience regular play contact with their peers during out-of-school hours.

Seventh: Fear development should constitute a major area of concern for the parents and guardians of latchkey children, especially of those children who find themselves at home without continuous companionship. Children who routinely stay home alone run at least one chance in three of developing substantial fear responses including recurring nightmares, fear of noises, the dark, and elevated concern for personal safety including fear of fires and especially of intruders. While the fear responses for those latchkey children being cared for by a sibling was

markedly less than for children at home alone, feelings of insecurity were reported as being significantly higher than for those children who were continuously supervised by an adult.

Eighth: Fear responses can be reduced by providing a pet for the child, but most especially by providing a close, concerned, interactive parent-child relationship during the time parent and child are in contact.